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Why Is Texas Letting Public Schools Go Broke?

candace baker

Over the past several months, state legislators across the U.S. have found themselves confronted with a force that presents itself as more vicious than any other: teachers. All over, teachers have been going on strike, demanding higher pay and denouncing the conditions that deep cuts in education funding have left them in. Social media posts by both teachers and parents showcasing what these conditions look like have gone viral, outraging people across the country who don't understand how President Clinton-era textbooks and broken desks are supposed to help children learn.

But as strikes have taken the news by storm in Oklahoma, Kentucky, West Virginia, and Arizona, Texas has been noticeably absent from the coverage. To any keen observer, this wouldn't make sense initially. In 2017, Texas was ranked 36th in a nationwide analysis on classroom spending. The state's funding system has been criticized repeatedly for being outdated and ineffective, and even though leaders established a panel to try to fix the problem, some feel that it's just for show.

To say the least, the system that Texas uses to fund its public schools is head spinning. But as Houston education reporter Laura Isensee does in her series, *Fair or Falling Short*, it can be simplified to provide a basic understanding. She explains that the state sets a per-student budget based on how much it wants to spend on education as a whole. The bulk of the funding for public schools comes from local property taxes, not the state itself. Since not all districts have the same property values, those who receive more from taxes

budget. Certain students will also receive extra funding because they might cost more to educate, such as those in Gifted and Talented Programs or those who are learning English as a second language.

To be clear, this is a gross oversimplification of a very complicated system. But even in this surface-level explanation, one can find several flaws. The first is in the extra funding that some students receive based on their educational needs. That funding formula, known as “weight,” is based on data from 1984 and hasn’t been adjusted to meet the rising cost of educating certain students. At the same time, the controversial “Robin Hood” system in which property wealthy districts have to send collected tax money to property-poor districts has been controversial for years, with critics saying that it punishes districts for economic success and higher property tax rates. In 2016, it left Houston with a \$95 million budget shortfall.

Such problems were only amplified when school districts across the state lost millions in funding when the Additional State Aid for Tax Reduction (ASATR) program was ended. The program was initially a compromise between the districts and the state that provided the former with additional funding in exchange for lowering their property tax rate. With the end of that program, schools were being forced to suddenly close huge funding gaps.

There is a general consensus among lawmakers that this system needs fixing. After 600 school districts sued the state for inadequate funding, the Texas Supreme Court ruled that the system did satisfy the minimum standards for public education set by the state constitution. At the same time, however, the ruling stated that Texas “school children deserve better” and that the system in place is “undeniably imperfect.”

As a strongly conservative state, Texas is known for its low tax, low service approach. In some ways, that might make sense. But when it comes to education, it’s frankly disturbing. When the state chooses to either take money from schools or not give it to them in the first place, it’s choosing against the interests of the millions of school-aged children. It’s choosing against updated supplies, competitive teacher salaries, respectable buildings, and adequate resources to prepare kids for their futures.

Among all of these issues, the push for privatization has entered the debate. Many people, including *The Texas Orator’s* own Mark Csoros, have argued for funding to be diverted toward charter schools and vouchers so that parents can take control of their children’s education and take them out of the public school system if they want to. But such a movement hits a wall of opposition when it diverts money from already struggling public schools to accomplish its goals. It’s baffling how much such a push defies common sense. If the public schools are struggling in part because they’re lacking in sufficient funding, then how is taking money away from them supposed to help?

It's also important to note that private and charter schools are allowed to be incredibly selective of which students they allow to attend their institutions. In 2013, Reuters found that "charters aggressively screen student applicants, assessing their academic records, parental support, disciplinary history, motivation, special needs and even their citizenship, sometimes in violation of state and federal law." So what's supposed to happen to the children who aren't deemed to be ideal candidates and are stuck in the public school system? Do we just forget about them and keep taking away the money that is supposed to provide for their education?

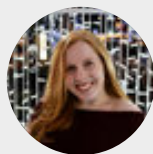
There are plenty of teachers in the state who are fed up with this, but unlike in other states, they can't make a public spectacle about it. Under Texas law, teachers can be fired for engaging in such activity.

Ultimately, the ones who suffer at the end of this debate are the children. Regardless of how one thinks the system should be run, we owe it to the next generation to provide a comprehensive, quality education that will set them up for success in college and beyond. At the same time, we owe it to our educators to ensure that they have the necessary resources to be able to fulfill the needs of each and every child, regardless of who they may be. To turn our backs on them would be to shoot ourselves in the foot, and it's safe to say that nobody wants that.

Education in and of itself is a public investment. But it's one that, when done right, can have incredible payoffs. It's the key to reducing poverty, increasing income, and creating a greater economic environment overall. Aren't those things that we should all want?

Education

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CANDACE BAKER

Candace is a freshman at UT majoring in Journalism and minoring in Government. In her free time, she enjoys seeing movies, reading the news, and being unproductive with her friends while awaiting the newest season of *Game of Thrones*.

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